



## ESSEX BUSINESS SCHOOL

**Reading Benjamin**

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*Working Paper No. WP 09/03*

January, 2009

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Within a period of about two years – from 2004 to 2006 – the journal *Culture and Organization* published no less than four papers by Hugo Letiche (2004, 2005a, 2006; Letiche and Statler, 2005), as well as one special issue edited by him (2005b). While it is unusual for any serious academic journal to be so over-exposed to one particular author, my argument in this paper is not so much about monopolisation of voice and the apparent inequalities of access to publishing outlets in the academy, but more about the quality of argumentation and scholarship portrayed in the work of Letiche.

Specifically, I will engage with the paper ‘Picture Melancholy’ (Letiche, 2005a), which appeared in a special issue – edited by Letiche (2005b) himself – of *Culture and Organization*, entitled ‘Artaud, the Real and the Melancholy’. In this paper, which, perhaps surprisingly, is not about Artaud at all – it doesn’t mention or reference Artaud once! – Letiche hopes to make “use of Walter Benjamin” to “reflect on the art of Barend Blankert and his self-professed intention of rendering melancholy” (2005a: 291). Despite the prominence of Benjamin in this paper – at least half of the paper is a direct or indirect commentary on, or ‘making use’ of, Benjamin – Letiche only makes reference to one of Benjamin’s works, namely *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* (1998). So, as reader one would expect a pretty close engagement with, what has also been called, Benjamin’s ‘Baroque book’. Unfortunately, no such engagement takes place in this paper, as Letiche mainly seems to rely on second-hand readings of Benjamin, and not one direct quotation is provided to Benjamin’s text, making it very difficult for readers to trace Letiche’s claims about Benjamin in Benjamin’s text itself. Letiche hence often relies on gross generalisations about Benjamin, which stand in complete contrast to the *oeuvre* of an author who worked very closely with text. These generalisations do not only happen, I argue, because of a poor, or second-hand reading of Benjamin’s ‘Baroque book’, but also because precisely the wider *oeuvre* of Benjamin is not taken into account, leading to misrepresentations of, and false claims about, Benjamin’s arguments.

Besides the very poor engagement with Benjamin’s text, Letiche also frequently misrepresents the field of organisation and management theory. While Letiche’s paper is clearly intended to provide a commentary on organisation and specifically the conception of ‘sense-making’, there are only two, rather fleeting, references to organisation theorists, namely Weick and de Monthoux. That is, there is no sustained discussion of how Benjamin might be read with and/or against organisation, nor does Letiche even attempt to explore possibilities of making use of organisation and management theory to disrupt Benjamin, or perhaps receptions of Benjamin.

This paper – which can be seen as a continuation of my reading of the ‘reading of critical theory’ in organisation and management theory (Böhm, 2007) – will not be a personal attack on Letiche. I think it is far too easy to subjectivise the problem of reading, or rather incorporating, philosophy in organisation and management theory. So, besides pointing to the rather obvious shortcomings of Letiche’s readings of both Benjamin and organisation and management theory, I will engage with a set of perhaps more structural questions: What does this case of bad reading tell us about the status of reading more generally in organisation and management theory? How can we conceptualise and problematise the relationship between philosophy and organisation/management? Why should we worry about bad scholarship in organisation and management theory? What are the political consequences of bad reading/scholarship?

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\* Paper presented at the conference ‘Practical Criticism in the Social Sciences of Management’, University of Leicester School of Management, 8-9 January 2009.

Again, this is not intended as a mindless attack against anyone. Rather, I offer this paper as an affirmative critique, which hopes to contribute to the development of the field of organisation and management theory – while this affirmation might, of course, involve a ‘destruction’ of the field as such. This paper will outline the impossibilities of such a destruction, offering a reading of Benjamin that hopes to go beyond the rather limited reading put forward by Letiche.

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To start off with, let’s read; let’s find out about what Letiche (2005a) is trying to achieve with his paper ‘Picture Melancholy’. He writes:

Contemporary writers, critics, or artists are confronted with a consumer society that commodifies all actions and relations; they have no escape from alienation and its melancholy. They can turn to satire, denunciation, and sarcasm to protect their sense of self. But protest becomes advertising; alternative behavior gets sold as life-styles; and ideas are lost in fashion. Voicing, displaying and proclaiming melancholic futility may be all that remains. Walter Benjamin argued that intellectuals, who became spokespersons of melancholic senselessness, are complicit with the degraded culture or politics they seem to oppose. Artists, writers and critics who accept uncertainty and indecisiveness can produce satire, sarcasm and irony. They can be anti-aesthetic, socially critical, and oppositional; but they remain figures of quietism. Appearances of critical action merely mask the melancholy found in their representative passivity and inaction. They criticize, but never explore, describe, or do anything. Intellectual revulsion at social injustice becomes a form of letting injustice go its own way. As Agamben (2003) has argued, by accepting governance through administration, the writer, critic, or artist can appear to oppose every idea, proposition, and principle that they want to. But the triumph of management defines an administration that is lacking in principles, where concepts are absent, and whose ideology is vacuous. Thus, intellectual positions are entirely irrelevant—the administration grinds on irrespective of whatever intellectuals say. A maximum of anomy and disorder coexist easily with the maximum of administration. Protesting against non-existent philosophical depth, or conceptual reflection, or political ideals, doesn’t do any damage to the administration. Anger, revulsion and opposition are largely ineffective. They are just so many poses, constituting a dramatized melancholy, incapable of making any difference. The intellectual/artist is reduced to ‘poses’ – that is, to melodramatic theater. (Letiche, 2005a: 292)

Essentially, Letiche here poses the age-old problem of ‘what is to be done?’, and, more specifically, the problem of ‘what is to be done, if everything one *can* do is immediately recuperated and nullified by the hegemony of management and administration?’ I’m very interested in these problems, as I think they are extremely important politically and worth exploring – especially within the context of critical management studies, as the aim of the CMS project, namely to critique and potentially undermine hegemonic ideologies and practices of management and organisation, might be futile, or worse, actually help hegemonic forces to reproduce and renew themselves. These are precisely the problems posed by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) in their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, as they were posed by numerous other authors, such as Marx, Lenin, Gramsci and Luxemburg, before them. There is no time and space here to engage with these works. All I’d like to say is that the ‘what is to be done’ problem, posed by Letiche, is an old one; it is one with a rich intellectual and practical history.

The first thing I’d like to say about Letiche’s paper is that it doesn’t engage or even acknowledge this rich history. Letiche gives students of organisation and management the impression of him being the first one to pose these problems. Equally, he gives us the impression of being the first one to read Benjamin, as there is virtually no reference to any work on Benjamin being done in organisation and management studies, not to speak of the wider field of social and cultural studies, where Benjamin has featured prominently in the past two decades (cf. Brodersen, 1996; Buck-Morss, 1989; Caygill, 1998; Benjamin and Osborne, 2000). Nor does Letiche position Benjamin within the wider tradition of critical theory. Besides a fleeting link to Adorno, there is no contextualisation of the often complex relationship between Benjamin and the Frankfurt School tradition, and the political consequences and debates resulting from different interpretations of this relationship. On page 302 of his paper Letiche writes: “In the struggle about this matter between Adorno and Benjamin, I take Adorno’s side – the more Benjamin asserts methodological subjectlessness, the more he is implicitly present in his work as subject (Adorno, 1991)” (Letiche, 2005a: 302). We learn nothing about this so-called struggle between Adorno and Benjamin. While I’m sure Letiche doesn’t want to consciously be so arrogant, the

implications are not so much relevant for his character, as they are *political*, for reasons that I will explore below.

Just to repeat, then: I'm not interested in any psychological explanations and speculations about the character of authors. Of course, personal histories do play a role in anybody's reading and writing. But I guess I'm too much of a materialist, as I can't fail to see how each personal history is the product of specific historical, social, cultural – speak materialist – forces. This is Foucault, of course, although he doesn't seem to be seen as materialist in many corners of organisation and management studies. I do though!

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The moment of danger (Benjamin, 1999a: 247), which I'd like to respond to here, is precisely the one that has been foreshadowed by Foucault's reception in organisation and management. As Jones (2002) and others have shown, Foucault has been read in particular ways by organisation and management scholars, and arguably the politically most radical readings – and I would call them materialist readings – have somehow been impossible in our field. As more and more people seem to make use of the work of Benjamin in organisation and management theory – one can point to Burrell and Dale (2003), Carr and Zanetti (2000), Sørensen (2004), Styhre and Engberg (2003), and ten Bos (2003), as well as my own efforts (Böhm, 2002, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007) – it is important to analyse exactly *how* Benjamin's work has been read and put to use.

This is precisely because reading is always already a doing. Let me quote here what I wrote in the paper 'Reading Critical Theory', which was an immanent critique of Alvesson's and Willmott's readings of Frankfurt School scholars: As Benjamin "tells us in his essay 'The Task of the Translator' (1999a: 70ff), an exact translation of a text is impossible. For Benjamin, the possibility of a text does not simply lie in its words; instead it can be found between words, the silence of the white space that surround letters, words, lines of text. Reading is a theoretical practice that aims to become worthy of the silent impossibility of a text. Reading is not strictly about reading words themselves, but the sub-text of language; to read between the lines: 'all great texts contain their virtual translation between the lines' (Benjamin, 1999a: 82). This is also to say that there is no pre-composed meaning in a text. Instead, every text has to, according to Benjamin, always be treated as a foreign language that has yet to be translated. In this sense, one does not simply read or write about critical theory or Alvesson and Willmott. Reading is a doing – a translating of, and an immanent engagement with, critical theory. Reading is an immanent critique of texts such as the ones produced by Alvesson and Willmott. If there is anything organization theory can learn from critical theory, then it is how to engage in an immanent practice of reading" (Böhm, 2007: 102).

So, according to Benjamin – and I think his essay 'The Task of the Translator' is particularly instructive here – *reading is a practical doing*. That is, reading doesn't just happen; it is not just the stringing together of words, but an active engagement with a text and language. Benjamin says, the true historian reads 'what has never been written' (Benjamin, 1974: 1238). What is particularly interesting here is the connection between reading and history. In his aphoristic essay 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', Benjamin (1999a: 245ff) says the following:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of a tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as a redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious. (Benjamin, 1999a: 247)

In this crucial passage, Benjamin sums up his view on the task of the critic, and one would have thought that this would have been useful to engage with when writing a paper like Letiche's. But it wasn't to be – more about this failure later. The important thing to realise at this stage is that, for Benjamin, reading is an active engagement – by the critic – with history and particular moments of danger. This makes reading and critiquing a materialist action, as one literally picks up the pieces of the past and puts them together in such a way that the emerging 'dialectical image', as Benjamin calls it in his *Arcades Project* (1999b), becomes useful, or more forcefully expressed, a hammer, which can intervene in a concrete situation of the present.

Benjamin very much practiced what he preached. His aphoristic text collections *One-Way Street* and the *Arcades Project* are readings of, and engagements with, the past, with history. He hopes that his particular way of putting words together will illuminate the reader and enable certain re-cognitions in what he perceived to be the moment of danger of capitalist development. He refers to these illuminations as 'flashes of knowledge' (1999b: 462). Such a flash must be understood as an event, an *Augenblick*, which hopes to discontinue and destruct the continuity of the 'eternal image' of history; that history, which is the history of the ruling classes; that history, which those in power will always already try to wrest away from us and even the dead. Hence, the work of the critic, of the reader and writer, is a deeply political one. The political struggle is precisely about history; our history, which, as we know from Foucault as well, is continuously being written anew.

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Given this reading of Benjamin, which I have just presented, it is perhaps surprising that Letiche (2005a) uses Benjamin to attack readers and critics. For him, readers, commentators and critics are engaged in a melancholic practice that doesn't do anything; it doesn't deal with the real issues of social injustice. "They criticize, but never explore, describe, or do anything", he writes. "Intellectual revulsion at social injustice becomes a form of letting injustice go its own way" (2005a: 292). In contrast, Letiche believes that Benjamin has found an alternative, more productive, melancholic action. Letiche writes:

Despite his censure of social criticism as ineffective and escapist melancholy, Benjamin authored his own strategy of melancholic action. Herein, incompleteness, partiality and fragmentation were supposed to be put to positive use. Existence seen through melancholy, he posited, is so many meaningless remains. Melancholy grasps the flotsam and jetsam of existence – writers, critics, or artists, can bring together these meaningless fragments of existence, in mosaics. The bits and pieces, to which melancholy reduces existence, can be (re-)assembled – the fragments can serve as a window on the universal. The artist doesn't have to seek out meaningful and important subjects, themes or assertions – that is, the socially legitimated and politically justified – but can practice outsider's art. By arranging the bits and pieces of the trash of history, the writer, critic, or artist can make a collage of the real. The pretense of the whole – in totalizing social and political critique, is debunked; and the mosaic or collage of the parts – in fragments, petites histories or essayist reflections, is embraced. The poses of melancholic intellectual and artistic opposition are dismissed, while melancholic bricolage is embraced. Evidently, one can acknowledge the overall meaninglessness of objects, ideas and events and still construct micro-mosaics of sensation, circumstance and thought. The specific miniatures of representation – visual or conceptual – do not have to assume (the doxa) of sense-making, of significance, or of truth. (Letiche, 2005a: 293)

The first thing to realise is that we never find out in Letiche's paper where his thoughts on Benjamin come from. While the words he strings together sound vaguely familiar Benjaminian, it never becomes clear where exactly he has read the things he associates with Benjamin. This is a truly un-Benjaminian thing to do, as Benjamin was always very careful to cite his sources. The *Arcades Project*, for example, is essentially a vast collection of quotations. He spent more than a decade of his life to put all of these quotations together, to build his archive of the emergence of cultural capitalism in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris. For him, the architectural artefact of the arcade was one materialist example of this emergence. He wanted to make sure to meticulously compile all the details of the arcades, as he thought this could help to illuminate us about the often depressing realities of the emerging bourgeois capitalist society. In other words, he practiced a reading of history, an engagement, as critic, with historical materialism.

In Letiche there is just a celebration of the Benjaminian form, but no content. That is, when Letiche celebrates Benjamin's fragments, his bricolage style – although Benjamin always called it 'montage' – his 'micro-mosaics of sensation, then he simply celebrates this particular form of writing, but ignores the historical content that is at the heart of Benjamin's attempt to illuminate us about a particular 'moment of danger'. In other words, Letiche practices a non-materialist reading of Benjamin. What adds insult to injury is that one is not sure really whether any reading of Benjamin has actually taken place at all. There is not one direct quotation of Benjamin's text. All that Letiche seems to rely on are second-hand readings of Benjamin's Baroque book. Letiche always uses phrases like 'Benjamin says this...', 'Benjamin argues that...' and 'Benjamin seeks that...'. We never find out where he says these things, in what context he says them, and, crucially, how the Baroque text might relate to the numerous other books and essays by Benjamin.

Now, you might say that this is a bit of a pedantic critique. Let me then explain why I think it is important to stay close to the text of Benjamin, or any other author for that matter. If we read Benjamin and write about him the way Letiche has practiced it, we take Benjamin out of context; we take history as well as materialism out of Benjamin. Quoting Benjamin means having a materialist engagement with the particular history that Benjamin wanted to rescue from the ruling classes. Failing to have this materialist engagement implies the danger of being complicit with the eternal image of history that the hegemonic classes always already want us to believe in. Let me explain in a bit more detail what I mean by this.

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Letiche (2005a) fails not only to engage properly with Benjamin's work, he also doesn't cite many, if any, organization and management texts. In the 'Picture Melancholy' essay, for example, there are only two references to what can be regarded as organisation and management studies authors: one fleeting reference to Weick, and one similarly fleeting reference to de Monthoux. Although this particular paper is supposed to be on sense-making, it is probably fair to say that there is no sustained engagement with the rich debates on sense-making in organisation and management studies. Equally, in Letiche's (2006) paper on Darwin, there is not even one reference to organisation and management studies authors. Although that paper is actually called 'Homology: Owen versus Darwin in Organizational Studies', it is as if 'organisation' and 'management' are written out of Letiche's work. One wonders why these papers are published in a journal called *Culture and Organization*.

To be sure, Letiche does talk about organisation and management. Let's cite his Darwin text: "If organizational studies is to flourish, the nature of the object of its study – organization – has to be much better established" (2006: 321). "If organization is merely a term for so many analogies, then there is almost nothing to hold the field of organizational studies together" (2006: 322). "In organizational studies, the concept of 'sameness' is not one of physical identity" (2006: 323). Or take the following, slightly longer, quote:

Organizational development is a notoriously inexact activity and efforts to define developmental pathways from Maslow to Hertzberg, Mintzberg to Argyris, Senge to Wenger remain infamously vague. Structures of developmental pathways that could be identified as homologous have not been established. And organizational development (OD) interventions remain problematic, in part because they are not clearly linked to homologous structures. If we had much more insight into the structures of the developmental pathways of organizing, we still might not be able to influence them; but we would be able to describe organizational processes in much more detail. Organizational change programs tend to work on a 'hit or miss' rationale, with almost no reference to cross-organizational or process homologies. In biology at least some developmental pathways have been described in detail—structures brought to bear in the ontogenic process have, to some degree, been identified. But the organizational structures, social psychological factors and actor network processes of the developmental pathways of organizing, have barely been touched upon" (Letiche, 2006: 325)

What all of these quotations have in common are very crude generalisation about the object of his study. He talks about organisation studies and organisational development in such general terms,

making generalised claims about the whole field, putting different authors together to create a field of sameness, that it is difficult to see how this can be passed as scholarship, as somebody making close readings and analyses of organisational texts. Or take the following example:

Management studies, in its focus on profit, efficiency, effectiveness and optimal solutions, has pre-judged which attractors or values it responds to. The archetypes or values of organization need to include individuality and collectivism, sense-making and material wants, power and resistance, purpose and chaos, order and celebration, hope and fear, etc.” (2006: 327)

Is *all* of management studies focused on profit, efficiency, effectiveness and optimal solutions? Has Letiche heard of ‘critical management studies’, which has been growing over the past two decades precisely because many more scholars than Letiche have grown tired of management studies’ hegemonic discourses. Why not acknowledge this work? For example, if Letiche is concerned with ‘value’, then why not enter into a discussion of value theory, particularly in labour process theory, where value has been discussed for, well, decades. But Letiche is either unaware of these discussions, or he chooses not to engage with these for whatever reason. If a newcomer to the field reads Letiche’s paper, s/he could think that Letiche is the first ever person to write about homology, and the problem of sameness in particular. Obviously, this is a ludicrous and arrogant impression to give. The entire work of Cooper (see 2001 for an overview), for example, has clear relevance to Letiche’s paper on homology, yet he fails to cite him even once.

This, of course, raises the question of why this bad scholarship, of which I’ve provided several examples in this paper, wasn’t picked up in the review process, which brings us to the institutional implications in all of this. Why is it that a journal like *Culture and Organization* allows for organisation to be written out of some of Letiche’s papers? If the journal doesn’t want to be about organisation, then why not take ‘organisation’ out of the title and become a cultural studies journal? Why rush to publish four papers and one special issue by Letiche within two years? What purpose does this serve, other than giving one who is already well established in academia a licence to write whatever he likes? Do we really need more half-baked papers, more texts, more speed?

Another revealing example of this apparent speed is that the reference style seems to change in *Culture and Organization* from 2004 to 2005, at least judging from Letiche’s papers published. Or have they really changed? Is it perhaps another example of the failure of careful publishing, of the failure of editing and oversight by the publisher of the journal, Routledge, which is part of a big commercial publishing conglomerate? That is, is Letiche perhaps caught up in the spirals of profit-oriented academic publishing, which seems to care less and less about what it brings to market, as long as it is a commodity. And can we not say that part of this speedy commodification process is the speed of reading that Benjamin seems to have been subjected to? In the hands of Letiche, *Culture and Organization* and Routledge, has Benjamin not been turned into a commodity, derived of any history, context and social relation?

Part of my critique of Letiche is therefore not only that we need to perhaps slow things down a bit, that we need a bit more old-fashioned academic rigour and scholarship, but that his failure of reading Benjamin should be read in a materialist and hence politico-economic way.

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So, to conclude, let me say this: I don’t want to be pedantic about reading, about staying close to author’s texts etc. I don’t want to come across as somebody who enforces the strict unwritten rules of academic scholarship. Through my engagement with the journal *ephemera* I know all too well how difficult it sometimes is to define difference vis-à-vis established ways of doing organisation and management studies, or even critical management studies. This is to say, if we are interested in a different future for organisation and management, then perhaps we need to entertain the idea that it is OK not to conform to traditional academic writing rules in our field. I’m very open to such an

argument, and I myself have experimented with writing of a different sort (e.g. Fuglsang and Böhm, 2002). I'm all for experimentation, difference and alternative writing styles.

The danger, however, is that if we do difference in the Letiche style, then we run the risk of writing history out of reading and hence commodifying the authors we hope to engage with. This has obvious political implications, which can be illustrated by Letiche's forgetting of organisation and management studies. Precisely because of Letiche's commodification of Benjamin, he fails to take into account the precise context and content of his writings. If Letiche had read *One-way Street* and the *Arcades Project*, for example, he would have found manifold applications of the fragmentary montage style that he only starts to develop in the Baroque book. Equally, he would have found numerous starting points for reading Benjamin with and against organisation and management studies. If sense-making, and Weick in particular, is Letiche's object of study, then should this not always include a specific context, a specific history, or, as Benjamin would call it, a specific 'moment of danger'? There is no 'moment of danger' in Letiche, as there is no history, no content. Letiche mainly concentrates on celebrating Benjamin's style of writing in fragments, but what he forgets is that the montage style always had the purpose of illumination. But I'm not sure what we are being illuminated about in Letiche. If he is an academic critically engaging in issues of organisation and management, and if his work is being published in a journal called *Culture and Organisation*, is it not fair to expect a certain illumination to do with organisation and management? Is it not politically extremely important that people like Letiche start to take organisation and management seriously; start to engage with it head-on, to expose the social, cultural, economic and environmental disasters that the hegemony of organising and managing produces on a daily basis? When do we stop pretending to be cultural theorists, or art historians, and start being organisation and management scholars, as our job titles mostly state?

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